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NOTES AND COMMENTS.

I.

ICONOCLASM NECESSARY TO PROGRESS.

THE American is by nature and education an iconoclast. To this fact we owe nearly all our moral and material progress. Had we set out with the idea that the past is sacred, because it is the past, and that its relics and institutions must, therefore, be cherished and preserved, we would still be what we were just before the Revolution—a little cluster of provinces reflecting the ideas of feudal Europe. But, by cutting loose from the past and, when the need arose, destroying its institutions, we became what we are to-day, the most progressive nation on the face of the earth. The Revolution itself was a gigantic act of iconoclasm, which stamped us as barbarians in the estimation of Europe. The organization of a state without a religion was another act of iconoclasm, which surely ought to have called down upon us the vengeance of heaven, if the men who believed in the old order of things were right. So, too, the refusal to perpetuate many of the social customs and traditions of the past was an act of iconoclasm of which, in the opinion of Europeans, only vandals could be guilty. Nevertheless, we have gone right along prospering until at last many of those who began by denouncing us on this score are now beginning to think that iconoclasm may not be such a bad thing, after all.

Such being the case, it is hardly necessary for an American to apologize for this National idiosyncrasy. It is justifying itself even in the eyes of our critics. But it is quite proper to call attention to the good that our iconoclasm has accomplished, in order to reassure the doubters. Many of us, in whom there is but small reverence for the past, are, it may be, secretly ashamed of the fact. We would not, of course, acknowledge it. But in our hearts we confess that we are really very terrible people; and although we go on being iconoclastic, we are oppressed with a sense of guilt. It is to remove that sense of guilt, made heavier, perhaps, by the recently-observed centennial of Washington's inauguration, that I write these lines. It is well, of course, to remember the good that has come to us from the past, and to venerate the names of its heroes, martyrs, and saints. But as for its traditions, usages, institutions, and material remains, the only question with us should be, What use are they to us? If they serve any good purpose in the world of to-day, retain them; if not, destroy them, no matter how closely they are linked with some great name or some mighty epoch. The world of to-day is for the men and women of to-day, and not for the pallid ghosts of the past. Destruction and revision are the two most potent weapons of progress. By destroying what is useless and bad, and by revising what is capable of improvement, we clear the way for the newer thought of our own age, which is capable of adding to and enriching the heritage of the past. Only thus does material and moral progress become possible.

As may easily be inferred, I have, personally, very little veneration for relics of the past. I can see no use in them except the gratification of a morbid sentimentality. I would not give a nickel for the most authentic relic of the most famous saint that ever lived. And the false teeth of Washington, which, I believe, some one treasures as a precious relic, would excite in me nothing more than a feeling of disgust. Still, the lover and collector of such relics is comparatively harmless; his folly affects nobody but himself and his friends; and so we may leave him to his fad, only regretting that so much intelligence is wasted in amassing and gloating over a lot of trumpery stuff of no intrinsic value whatever.

But society at large is injured by the preservation of old institutions and traditions merely because they are old. The man who tries to hold his generation to a belief in and love for an outworn idea, on the plea that it was once vital, is a public enemy and should be so regarded. The man who stands up in this age of marvelous progress and laments the glories of the past is unworthy to bear a hand in the work of the modern world. He is either a dreamer, a sciolist, or a crank. I believe in burying what is old and surrounding ourselves with what is new. If it could be proved that the ground occupied by the Pyramids was needed for the development of the race, I should be in favor of tearing down the meaningless old heaps of stones within twenty-four hours. And in place of the picturesque old dwelling-houses of so many European cities, saturated as many of them are with the disease-germs of half a score of generations, I would like to see newly-built houses, with modern improvements and modern conveniences. Interesting as may be the old house of your grandfather, from an archaeological point of view, it cannot compare in comfort and luxury with the house that you can build to-day. The lovers of the past are constantly mourning over the obliteration of old landmarks, especially in our great cities. They actually seem to think that the growth of a great metropolis like New York is a crime because, forsooth, it demands the demolition of some old colonial building whose usefulness has long ago departed. They do not understand that constant and continuous change is the mark of true progress, and that to stand still is to go backward. Let us, if we will, hoard the heirlooms and relics of the past in our museums, where we can look at them when we have nothing better to do. They will, at least, teach us how far we have advanced since the days when these things were considered the master-pieces of human skill. But do not let us, out of a morbid reverence for the past, cumber the earth with useless monuments and buildings whose only value is their age. Do not let us perpetuate laws and customs and traditions in our social and political life, whose only excuse for being is that, a hundred years ago, or two hundred years ago, they were the very efflorescence of human wisdom.

The application of my little homily is this : Do not feel any secret pangs of guilt because you share in the iconoclastic spirit of the American people. Rather rejoice because that spirit has been so largely manifested in the destruction of old institutions, in the abrogation of old laws, in the suspension of old customs, in the breaking-down of old lines of caste, in the death of old superstitions, and in the cutting-loose of the American Republic from so many of the outworn ideas and ideals of the old world. There is still a great work for the American iconoclast to do in politics, art, science, commerce, sociology, and religion. I hope he will do it so fearlessly, so effectively, and so wisely, that in the great American Republic of the future not a vestige of the old abuses and the old falsehoods will remain.

PERCY DOUGLAS.

II.

ILLUSTRIOUS SECONDS.

WHEN a new writer appears and succeeds in attracting attention, the public, having read, praised, criticised, busies itself with his (or her) classification. What is this? Have we a new George Eliot? an American George Sand? an Anglicized Gautier? a reëmbodied Milton? The public, when thus rummaging among the crowded store-rooms of its brain, let it be understood, intends to be friendly and complimentary. If any one advanced the idea that it was heaping insult upon the new and would-be original author, and giving him a seat in the school-room where he aspired to be a master, it would flout the idea with scorn. And as the public will inevitably go on comparing and classifying, the author must look out for himself and not give it the opportunity. As a matter of fact, however, nine out of ten authors can be classified very readily; it is the tenth's inability to be filed that gives him the position of master instead of pupil, and a chance to live.

Every woman who has written a striking novel in England during the past ten years has been hailed as a second George Eliot. These women have doubtless been flattered, and have not realized that in resembling George Eliot they must ever re-